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## Patriotten in Groningen 1780-1795

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## Patriots in Groningen 1780-1795: a summary

During the Orange 'revolution' of 1747-1749 Groningen stands out because of the violence of the disturbances and because of the relatively efficient way the uprising is canalized. The Patriot 'revolution' of 1781-1787 seems to cause hardly any commotion in Groningen. It suggests stagnation, even decay, of 'revolutionary skill'. Therefore this study starts with a comparison between these two rebellious movements. The disturbances should be seen against the background of the ever increasing development towards oligarchy in the Republic of the United Netherlands. The irritation caused by this political exclusivism erupts, both in 1747 and in 1781, due to the disastrous course of a war which the Republic has got involved in. In 1747 the 'people' call for the stadtholder to save the threatened Republic, to break the power of the hated governors (*regenten*) and to restore the rights of the citizens. In the eighties the 'Patriots', disappointed in William of Orange, want to break the power of the stadtholder as well as of the oligarchs and to give the 'people' back their political influence.

The press plays an important part in stimulating the commotion in 1747. An indignant city government even felt compelled to suppress the most critical newspaper, the *Groninger Nouvellist*, for several months. The tone of the pamphlets is rather primitive and they cannot be considered a serious contribution to the political discussion. On the other hand the *Nouvellist*, when it is published again, continuously makes suggestions for improving the government, particularly for a better way of levying taxes. Like elsewhere in the Republic, the campaigners in Groningen are mainly members of the lower middle class. The sergeants of the citizen militia soon become the leaders of the rebellious movement. The 'people' obviously put their trust in them and let them organize the petitions which are to be presented to the burgomasters and councillors. These petitions are enumerations of desired reforms rather than well-considered proposals to alter the 'constitution'. The higher-ranking officers of the militia, who are too strongly connected with the establishment, join the petitions hesitatingly. The same can be said about the *taalmannen en gezworenen* ('spokesmen and sworn representatives'). This assembly is an electoral college that designates new councillors; the members regard themselves as representatives of the citizens of Groningen. When the *taalmannen en gezworenen* at last try to plead their 'democratic' rights with the stadtholder, they are brusquely censured: the prince is only interested in consolidating his own position. The hateful malpractices of the

oligarchy soon come back, this time under the protection of the house of Orange.

The mounting aversion to the stadtholderly government naturally directs itself at William of Orange and his 'lieutenant' in Groningen, A.A. van Iddekinge. Van Iddekinge is – not without reason – accused of nepotism and an authoritarian way of directing the city. Among the middle class there is a growing number of people who do not support William V anymore: when the moment comes, they will be found on the side of the opposition. The shameful course of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War creates such a situation. The opposition can now pose as the true 'Patriots' and thus undermine the legitimacy of the political establishment. This time the pamphlets start the political discussion. A downright satirical poem, the *Groninger Rarekiek*, becomes a polemic pamphlet to defend the Patriot cause. Most of the pamphlets, however, are of a serene character. Their authors plead for a 'Constitutional Restoration' (*Grondwettige Herstelling*) and borrow their arguments from an idealised past: old agreements should be renewed and the 'constitution' restored to its original state. Natural right does not play an important part in the exchanges of ideas. With increasing enthusiasm the *Groninger Courant* informs its readers about the rise of the Patriot movement. The threat of a war with Austria brings about the implementation of an old plan: the arming of the civilians. While the civil militia (*burgerregiment*) is being modernised, the Patriots set up a private Free Corps 'Voor Onze Duurste Panden' ('For Our Dearest Pledges'), so they have their own organization. Their meeting place then becomes the centre from which political action can be attempted.

The first directors of the Free Corps are a reflection of the supporters of the Patriot party: Johan Herman Geertsema as the representative of the frustrated patrician families who are excluded from office by the Van Iddekinge 'clan'; Tonco Modderman en Paulinus van Oldenneel as members of the Mennonite and Roman-Catholic communities which strive for emancipation; the freemasons Scato Trip, Tammo Adriaan ten Berge and again Tonco Modderman on behalf of the enlightened and 'well-thinking' citizens. The social and cultural societies are important suppliers of members for the Patriot party in Groningen. Discontent has penetrated the upper middle class. This time the *taalmannen en gezwoerenen* are an advanced base in the town hall for the Patriots. The citizen militia increasingly co-operates with the Patriot Free Corps (*vrijcorps*). A well-organized petition movement supports the peaceful 'attack on the town hall' and finally the Patriots come into power. So one has to conclude that the 'revolutionary skill', between 1750 and 1780, unlike what first impressions seemed to suggest has gained more strength in Groningen.

A kind of a social map of Groningen can be drawn by consulting a special source: the registers of the city cleansing and lighting taxes (*drekgeld- en lantarengeldregisters*). These taxes are imposed in the same way as present-day real estate tax, which means that taxation depends on the estimated value of the premises each family inhabits. Thus we are enabled to find out in which streets the rich and the poor had their dwellings. This information also creates the possibility to check what is said about the social position of the Patriots in Groningen. In the archives we find a list

of members of one of the divisions of the Patriot Free Corps which also names the streets where the Free-Corpsists lived, and so affords a sample of the Patriots' socio-economic position. This confirms that a large part of the Groningen Patriots belong to the upper middle class: they pay far more than the average sum of *drek-en lantarengeld*. Concerning their professions, there is another source that may be consulted: a satire, written after the collapse of the Patriot party in September 1787. In this libel one can find the names of dozens of Patriots, mostly with their professions or functions. It is obvious that many Patriots are found in artisan circles and in all ranks of the city's officialdom. After the study of the Patriots' social position, some prominent Groningen families are portrayed: Van Iddekinge, Siccama and Modderman. Members of the Siccama family as well as Tonco and Jan Modderman are staunch Patriots. The Van Iddekinge family seems quite isolated socially and culturally, whereas the other two families show a wide range of activities. The Modderman family, belonging to the Mennonite denomination, is not allowed to participate in politics, unlike the patrician family of the Siccamas. Like their political rivals of the Van Iddekinge 'clan', the Siccama family has created a large network of relations. Both families place their networks in position when there is a vote in the town hall on the question – to put it briefly – whether or not to support the stadtholder (17th March, 1786). The Siccama 'clan', and thereby the Patriots, beat the Van Iddekinges by a small majority.

Generally speaking, the religious minorities applaud the Patriot ideas about equality and freedom. In Groningen, the Roman-Catholics and the Mennonites in particular try to improve their positions. The former demonstrate their growing self-confidence by presenting some petitions to the burgomasters and councillors. As a result of their actions they – and at the same time the members of all Christian religions – are admitted to the ranks of corporal and sergeant in the citizen militia. The clergy in Groningen do not engage in politics, so all action is a matter of laymen. The Roman-Catholics' contribution to the Free Corps is a relatively small number of remarkably faithful members. On the other hand, the pacifist Mennonites are surprisingly over-represented in this society for military training. However, a distinction should be drawn not only between communicant members and 'sympathizers' – born of Mennonite parents but not (yet) admitted as full members by baptism and confession – , but also between two Mennonite denominations. The communicant members confine their support for the Patriots to non-military actions like signing a petition or contributing to the 'Patriot Fund' (*Vaderlands Fonds*): only two of them actually carry arms. Most of the militant Mennonites are 'sympathizers'. Those Mennonites who have a reputation for being strict in matters of religion are notably more active in the Patriot movement than their brethren who hold moderate religious opinions. A third Mennonite community is barely mentioned, due to a lack of sources.

The number of Lutherans in the Free Corps is small and they do not attain prominent positions in the Patriot movement. Many members of this denomination belong to the poor: not a category where the Patriots have much support. In the case of the,

fairly recent, Jewish community in the city a remarkable fact appears: the Patriots, fighters against exclusivism, appear to be exclusive themselves: only avowed Christians are admitted to the Free Corps. The Jews take no part in the political discussion until 1795, when the first attempts are also made to create more democratic relations in the Jewish community of Groningen.

The Dutch Reformed Church has a privileged position in the officially Calvinist Republic of the United Netherlands, and so will not benefit if things are profoundly changed. Nevertheless the Patriots gain impressive support among elders and deacons of the Dutch Reformed Church and its French sister-church, the *Eglise Wallonne*. In the *Eglise Wallonne* as a whole there is much sympathy for the Patriot movement, mostly among its members of Dutch extraction. They belong to the upper middle class, which is closely connected with the cultural societies and the college of *taalmannen en gezworenen*. It is exactly in these circles that the Patriots have their most important support. In the Dutch Reformed church council the deacons are significantly more in favour of the Patriot party than the elders. The continuous development towards oligarchy draws a clear dividing line between the 'aristocratic' elders and the deacons. The latter, increasingly recruited from the middle class, embrace the Patriots' 'democratic' plans for political reform.

At the awakening of the Patriot movement in Groningen, the case of Professor F.A. van der Marck becomes topical again. In 1773 he had been dismissed from the university on a charge of heterodoxy. In the Patriot period the affair still evokes some passion; yet in its own time it had hardly affected the matriculation of new students at Groningen university. The steady decline in student numbers is due to factors operating not just at Groningen but at all universities in the Republic. In Groningen the students are more concerned about keeping their university up to the mark than the professors and governors (*curatoren*) are. The protection of academic privileges is even the subject of a short but fierce petition movement. The petitions are especially directed at the professors. Professor Paulus Chevallier, too, voices his concern about the situation the university is in. At the same time he meets with increasing understanding among his colleagues for the enlightened views he has voiced in his rectoral address. At this stage, the professors seem to be touched more by the spirit of the age than they were ten years before. There is no lack of sympathy for the Patriot movement among the university teachers, although it is mainly manifested in a moderate way. Professor Chevallier utters his true Patriot feelings chiefly in the letters to one of his sons. In the matter of military training the students are at first more eager, but soon they confine themselves, like their teachers, to less strenuous activities.

1787 should have been the harvest year for the Patriot party. However, the commission that is to define precisely the rights of the *gezworenen* is effectively sabotaged by the supporters of the 'old order'. An ambitious plan for a well-trained people's army, made by another commission, is put out of court in a flood of pamphlets. Preparing a project to call up the people to give their opinions about the restoration of the

'constitution' (*Plan van Oproeping*), a third commission makes remarkably democratic proposals about the voting rights of the Groningen citizens. But the commission's report is offered to the burgomasters and councillors after the Prussian invasion: so the proposals have no chance of success. With help from abroad the Orange party is victorious. The Patriot Free Corps is disbanded, all 'democratic' resolutions made in the short period of Patriot hegemony are set aside. A violent riot at the central square (*Grote Markt*) of Groningen, in which the Patriot club is involved, means the end of this society. The club's manager and his brother become the victims of a vindictive prosecution. In 1788 Rev. De Blau, a clergyman who had criticized the old political system in 1783, is accused of disrespect towards the city government and dismissed. The public prosecutor draws up long lists of 'political delinquents'. The Patriots are gradually removed from the seats of power, simply by not being re-elected. Some people feel compelled to flee. Several times, Professor Chevallier is the victim of unpleasant measures by the city and university governors. None the less, in Groningen the Orange reaction is rather moderate compared to, for instance, the neighbouring province of Friesland. At the same time the Patriot resistance seems to be more persistent than elsewhere in the Republic. Besides, after their political defeat, we see the Patriots direct their attention to other causes. They rally round the small but dynamic person of the pastor of the *Eglise Wallonne*, Henri Daniël Guyot, and take a considerable share in the foundation of the first institute for deaf-mutes in the Netherlands. In the same way they support the realization of the 'Department for the City and Province of Groningen of the Society for Public Welfare' (*Departement Stad en Lande van de Maatschappij: Tot Nut van 't Algemeen*). Several Patriots participate in the 'English Reading Society', established in the same period. Nevertheless this club is by no means one of those reading societies which suddenly abound as Patriot under-cover organizations in that period. Meanwhile, freedom seems to approach from revolutionary France. The advance of the French troops sets the revolution in motion in Groningen as well. The Patriot Free Corps is revived and guarantees, once more in conjunction with the citizen militia, an orderly course of the events. Burgomasters and councillors are asked to retire and to offer their seats to persons supported by the will of the people. The tree of liberty is erected, the French enter Groningen, Rev. De Blau is rehabilitated, Professor Van der Marck is asked to resume his lectures at Groningen university: a new age has come.